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ABSTRACT

Purposes and functions of regional research and development (R&D) services sponsored by the National Institute of Education (NIE) are described, based on a task force's assessment of R&D services provided by regional laboratories. The historical context of the following questions are addressed: whether the conduct of R&D constitutes a service, or whether regional R&D services focuses on other functions (e.g., needs assessment, dissemination) related to R&D. Attention is also directed to the changing organizational context in which R&D is performed, the policy context, the establishment of the new Department of Education, progress in the field of dissemination and utilization, and leadership activities sponsored by the Program on Dissemination and Improvement of Practice. The essential features of regional laboratories as a special kind of institution and the special R&D services that such institutions provide are considered. It is suggested that these laboratories are in a special position to undertake the regional needs assessment function and to broker the mobilization of resources within a region to meet those needs. They also provide leadership for a coordinated dissemination and utilization system and they work for consensus among the components of the educational community in their region. (SW)

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PURPOSES AND FUNCTIONS OF NIE-SPONSORED REGIONAL R&D SERVICES

Paper Prepared for the Task Force
on Nationwide R&D Services

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II. Proposed Plan for Providing R&D Services to Unserved Regions

A. Purposes and Functions of NIE-Sponsored Regional R&D Services

Introduction. This Task Force originated in the concerns expressed by the Congress, the Panel for Review of Laboratory and Center Operations, and the Council that all regions of the country have access to the kinds of R&D services provided by regional laboratories. In each case this concern was coupled with an interest in promoting the coordination of research and related functions on both a nation-wide and regional basis.

At one one level of generality the purposes to be achieved have already been stated in NIE's Adminstrative Policy and Procedures (NIE January 15, 1979) and in the general contractual conditions for all laboratories. However, in order to apply these policies to the regions not now served by regional laboratories it is necessary to refine these statements of purpose and to interpret them in several important contexts.

Contexts for Understanding The Meaning of "Regional R&D Services". The term, "regional R&D services" is extremely vague and has been subject to widely varied interpretations. For example, does the conduct of research and development constitute a service? Or does the term focus on other functions (e.g. needs assessment, dissemination, implementation, evaluation) related to research and development?

First of all, let us examine these questions in the historical

context. At the time the Laboratory Program was established, the institutional system for educational research and practice improvement was very rudimentary. Educational research and curriculum development projects were sponsored on a very small scale by the federal government and private foundations, largely conducted by colleges and universities. Laboratories were conceived as a new organizational mechanism which would help to "bridge the gap" between educational R&D and practice improvement. However, it was soon discovered that there wasn't that much R&D in the pipeline and therefore not much "gap bridging" to be done, and laboratories were shunted into making up this deficiency by concentrating on major curriculum development efforts. The return of the laboratories to something approximating their original mission has been a very recent policy shift.

In the meantime, the organizational context has changed radically. Primarily as a result of the establishment of a large number of federal programs, but also as a consequence of changes taking place in state and local school systems and other organizational sectors, there has been a great prolifeation of organizations and sub-units which perform one or more RDD&E functions. (This point can be elaborated by citation to the reports generated by the DIP sponsored study of R&D organizations, the directories published for the Dissemination Forum, the NTS State Abstracts for their study of State Dissemination Capacity Building, the Stevens study of intermediate units, the Brickell study of SEA's etc. See the "organizational context" portion of my paper A Contextual Framework. . .)

As a result of "letting a thousand organizations bloom", we now have, not a neatly designed and articulated R&D system, but a "configuration" or "community" of organizations. (Clark and Guba, 1974). It is important to understand the salient characteristics of this configuration:

- o There is no clear-cut division of labor among kinds of organizations. All RDD&E functions area performed by more than one kind of organization.
- o Few organizations are exclusively devoted to educational RDD&E; most have some other primary mission (e.g. instruction, the advancement of knowledge, defense research).
- o No orgnizational type, including the federal government, is in a position to control other organizations in more than limited ways; interorganizational arrangements and transactions must be achieved as a result of negotiation and bargaining.
- o In this situation, the achievment of the goal of "bridging the gap" between research and practice requires the cooperation and coordination of many organizations, yet there are few incentives for such coordination.

When one examines the existing laboratories in this context, two things are clear: (1) If one thinks of "regional R&D services" in terms of traditional RDD&E functions (whether one uses a classification of four or fourteen categories), there is nothing unique about the functions performed by laboratories: there are other organizations

performing each of these activities. (2) On the other hand, NIE policy places no restrictions on the functions to be performed by laboratories:

> "Within the boundaries of relevant NIE policies, no institutional will be *a priori* prohibited from engaging in any type of educational research and development activity, although the differences in primary purposes likely will lead centers to concentrate more on basic research activities and laboratories to concentrate on more applied research, development, and dissemination activities." (NIE, Jan. 15, 1979, p. 3).

Each R&D function can also be thought of as a type of service. The policy concern with which we stated implies that regions which do not have a laboratory are failing to receive important services. The implicating is that, if we conducted a detailed needs assessment in each region of the country there would be a clear differentiation between regions with a laboratory and regions without. One of the ways this task force might proceed would be to conduct such a needs assessment. However, it is very doubtful that a careful empirical inquiry would support the assumption on which the "argument from need" rests; on the contrary, it is highly likely that some "unserved regions" have access to R&D services that are equal to or better than those in some of the served regions. The implication is clear: the unique contribution which laboratories make to providing regional R&D services is not to be found in the enumeration of R&D functions. We must look elsewhere.

However, we must first review some important features of the current policy context. These are considered under two headings:

the forces which make for fragmentation, and the current needs and opportunities for improvement of coordination.

The forces which made for fragmentation are many and include the following:

- o The constitutional status of education as primarily a state and local function.
- o The importance of education as a major societal function and its interaction with all other institutional sectors (e.g. economic, family, etc.)
- o The project or soft money system which is favored by the chief sponsors of educational RDD&E
- o The proliferation of categorical programs at federal and state levels.
- o Rapid social and demographic change.

On the other hand, there are important forces supporting improved coordination. In the first place, the establishment of the new Department of Education and the current work on planning and organizing the Department represent an a significant opportunity for coordinating and consolidating federal programs. It is not clear the extent to which this task force will be able to participate in this effort, but we hope to stay in communication with those responsible. Certainly any initiatives regarding services for new regions, as well as planning for the existing laboratories, needs to be consonant with thinking regarding the new Department.

In the second place, in the important field of dissemination and utilization significant progress is being made for better coordination of effort. Given our community or configurational metaphor, one important means of coordination is the achievement of consensus among the members of the community on the ends and means of the RDD&E enterprise. While by no means complete, such a consensus seems to be emerging, as evidenced by the following:

- o The recommendations of the Interstate Project on Dissemination (IPOD, 197)
- o The statement of the Dissemination Advisory Group (DAG, 197)
- o The "statement of professionals" at the first National Dissemination Forum
- o Interest of the National Council on Educational Research in developing a comprehensive dissemination policy (See staff papers prepared for the Council July 13, 1979 and Nov. 30, 1979).

In addition, the Program on Dissemination and Improvement of Practice (DIP) sponsors a number of leadership activities designed, in part, to encourage better coordination. (see section on leadership activities/strategies, Nov. 30 paper to Council.)

These include:

- o Inquiry to strengthen the knowledge base about dissemination and use of knowledge to improve practice. NIE supports

research, development, evaluation, and policy analysis (e.g., the Program on Research and Educational Practice) to guide decision making and program development.

- o Capacity building to strengthen field capabilities for performing dissemination and improvement activities. NIE provides leadership through demonstration, seed money programs and technical assistance and professional development; e.g. R&D Utilization Program, State Dissemination Capacity Building, and the R&D Exchange.
- o Coordination (i.e. communication activities) to provide improved articulation of existing capabilities. NIE provides action leadership in the dissemination community through activities such as national and regional dissemination forums, national and state dissemination leadership projects, and the networking of leading scholars to encourage top level thinking on the subject of dissemination and school improvement (e.g. the Far West Laboratory Seminar on the implications of new organizational perspectives for dissemination planning)

What is the "Essence" of the Laboratories and the Services They Provide? While we hestitate to use the term "unique", we are now in a position to identify the essential features of the regional laboratories as a special kind of institution and to describe the special "R&D services" that such institutions can provide. Consider the following:

- o Whereas most other organizations are dominated by the project or soft money system, laboratories have assurances of support for large blocks of time. This provides the opportunity

for sustained and cumulative (i.e. "programmatic") work on priority problems.*

- o Laboratories are among the few institutions which, with minor exceptions, have a mission entirely devoted to educational research and practice improvement. Thus, they are not distracted by other incentives.
- o Given their goverance structure and the requirement to represent all significant segments of the educational community, they are in a special position to undertake the regional needs assessment function and to broker the mobilization of resources within a region to meet those needs.

This last statement, we believe, is the key to identifying the unmet needs in each of the regions not now served by a laboratory. These regions do not have an organizational entity with a governance structure like that of the laboratories and therefore capable of performing the key needs assessment resource mobilization functions. We conclude that the achievement of the objective of "providing regional R&D services in the unserved regions" can only be met by establishing new organizational entities in each region having the governance structure and general conditions required of existing laboratories. While we may wish to leave open whether such new organizations would want to use the term "laboratory" in their name, from the point of view of NIE

* It is interesting the extent to which existing laboratories have been able to achieve this in the past despite shifting federal policy. Given current NIE policy, the opportunities for programmatic work are magnified.

policy such new institutions must be dealt with as members of the laboratory set for all funding, monitoring and management purposes.

There are two key aspects of the needs assessment function. One concerns the determination of the educational needs of the region. This is not simply an empirical task, but involves the interpretation of facts in relation to values. Often it will be necessary to deal with value conflicts between important constituencies. The second aspect concerns the measurement of the regional RDD&E capacity to deal with the educational needs. Only when both types of need have been assessed can the mobilization or brokering function be properly addressed.

Given needs assessment and mobilization as the central purposes of regional institutions, the traditional RDE&E functions can be understood as being appropriate means for achieving these purposes. The specific nature of the activities conducted under each of these functions and the balance among them will be a function of the particular needs of each region.

Another type of balance is involved, that between actually performing certain work and arranging for other performers or networks of performers to do the work.

There is a major but not insoluble problem with this approach. In our system of government, regional institutions have an inherently ad hoc character. No "laying on of hands" by NIE can give regional institutions their legitimacy to perform these functions, although support and funding by NIE will be crucial. Legitimacy for such a

mission must come from regional institutions. It is for this reason that the governance structure of each institution is crucial.

This delineation of the special purposes of regional institutions gives a special role to functions which have been called dissemination and utilization functions. As recognized by the Panel on Laboratory and Center Operations, the resources of regional institutions are too small to permit trying to serve local schools and school districts directly; they must work through other service organizations to achieve leverage in their work. Important activities in the dissemination/utilization area include:

- Conducting R&D on dissemination and practice improvement processes and structures and mobilizing research knowledge from other sources.
- Providing technical assistance in D/U to other agencies
- Organizing D/U networks
- Mobilizing D/U knowledge for use by organizations providing professional development
- Training D/U personnel.

Does this perspective exclude regional institutions from performing <u>educational</u> R&D? They may conduct such work when it is needed and other institutions are not doing the needed work. They may need to do educational R&D for pilot or demonstration purposes and to maintain "hands on" familiarity with the field. But they will not be able to perform their cordination/leadership function if they are seen as competing with other institutions, and therefore their work needs to be more of a gap filling nature.

To sum up, we have said that the central purposes of regional institutions are to:

- o conduct assessments of the educational needs and RDD&E capabilities of their regions
- o achieve synergy by mobilizing disparate R&D efforts into programmatic ones
- o provide leadership for a coordinated D/U system
- o work for consensus and handle creative tensions among the components of the educational community in their region